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Study: City can support new 12,500-seat arena  
Additional concerts, indoor football, hockey  
recommended to fill venue  
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Tucson could support a new 12,500-seat arena  
Downtown - that's about one-third larger than the  
TCC arena - according to a new consultant study done  
for the city.

All those extra seats could be filled by bringing in a  
minor-league hockey team and an arena football team  
to go with college club hockey and more concerts and  
events like monster-truck shows, according to a new  
draft feasibility study delivered to the City Council  
this week.

The city, looking to make a new arena one of the  
crown jewels of the Rio Nuevo Downtown  
redevelopment project, hired Conventions, Sports &  
Leisure International to find out if Tucson could  
support a new arena, what it would cost and what it  
would take to make it successful.

The study does not include cost predictions or where  
the money will come from. That will be covered in a  
second phase to be completed over the next two to  
three months.

Previous city estimates range from \$60 million to \$80  
million. Similarly sized arenas built recently other  
cities cost from \$36.5 million for a 9,600 seat facility  
in Laredo, Texas, to \$49.6 million for 10,500 seat  
capacity in Corpus Christi, Texas, to \$291 million for  
an entire new convention center and 17,000 seat arena  
in Omaha, Neb.

One likely city scenario calls for the new arena to  
replace the existing Tucson Convention Center arena,  
built in 1971 as part of the original \$17.6 million

## What the study recommends

- Feasibility study  
recommendations for a new  
Downtown arena:
- A 11,000 fixed-seat arena with  
the capacity to add another 1,500  
seats for concerts. The TCC now  
has a seating capacity of almost  
9,300.
- Ice surface, benches, penalty  
boxes and announcer's box.
- 25,000 square feet of column-  
free floor space for exhibit space,  
to better serve convention needs.
- Eight to 10 new meeting rooms  
that could accommodate groups of  
25 to 1,200.
- 3,700 to 4,200 parking spots,  
including existing parking near  
the TCC.

## The lowdown

**What:** A consultant study  
recommends Tucson could  
support a new arena with up to  
12,500 seats for concerts, with  
minor-league hockey and indoor  
football teams and the UA Icecats  
as permanent tenants.

**What's next:** A second phase of  
the study will be done to  
determine the cost of a new  
facility and where the money will  
come from. Both studies will then  
be presented to the mayor and  
City Council, which will decide  
whether to go ahead with the  
proposal. That could happen  
before the end of the year.

**Then what:** Tentative plans are  
for a developer to build the arena  
on a city-owned site. The existing  
Convention Center arena could be  
rebuilt into more convention  
facilities. Voters would have to  
approve bonds to pay for the

Tucson Community Center complex. It holds less than 9,300 people for concerts and operates at a \$3 million annual deficit made up from the city's general fund.

The study says a new arena could be successful, even though demographically, Tucsonans are older and have less household income and discretionary entertainment spending than the national average. Visitors from Mexico, seasonal winter residents and University of Arizona students would make up for any lack of local spending power, it says.

Including new minor-league hockey as a linchpin for a new arena raises questions in Tucson, where four minor-league hockey teams have failed, none lasting more than two years. City officials and the study dismiss those failures as the product of poor teams with unstable ownership operating in an inadequate facility.

And city and minor-league hockey officials insist previous false starts don't mean hockey can't be successful in Tucson.

An out-of-town private ownership group already connected to teams in the ECHL hockey league has expressed an interest in Tucson's arena plans, according to league Commissioner Brian McKenna. But he said that interest is tied to a new arena.

"We would not have an interest in the market without a new facility - it's been tried in the past with a different facility and it hasn't worked," he said.

TCC Director Rich Singer said he received an inquiry from the Phoenix Coyotes when their American Hockey League affiliate in Utah ceased operations last year and they were looking for a new farm team, but they went elsewhere after learning Tucson wouldn't have a new arena for at least three years.

The UA men's club hockey team, the Icecats, plays its home games at the TCC. Attendance has been declining, but the study predicts a paid average attendance of 2,000 per game.

Supporters say Tucson would be able to attract bigger-name entertainers with a new space.

"The new arena is huge for Downtown development and for the city, in terms of the spinoff and economic development opportunities, because of the number of patrons who would come Downtown," said Greg Shelko, director for Rio Nuevo, which has budgeted \$4 million over the next decade to help pay for pre-development arena costs.

"The facility we have today hurts us," Shelko said. "It's very dated, it doesn't offer nice lighting or pleasant seating, it doesn't attract the consumer. It's functionally obsolete by almost every definition."

The study predicts that with a new arena, Tucson would attract 12 to 16 concerts annually, up from an average of about seven shows at the TCC.

But that's not a sure thing, especially with two casinos offering competition in attracting artists, said Danny Zelisko, president of Evening Star Productions, which books acts into Tucson, Phoenix and Las Vegas.

Local casino venues are smaller than the TCC, but they're able to attract big-name acts because they're willing to pay to get the concert. "Entertainment is a loss-leader for gambling," Zelisko said.

Artists who can fill a larger hall will often skip smaller cities and figure that fans will travel to Phoenix or another hub to see them. And they do, Zelisko said.

He thinks money would be better spent fixing up the existing arena, putting in better concessions and creating bar areas to hang out in during the show because people want more than just a concert, he said.

Just adding more seats wouldn't take Tucson from a third-level to a second-level concert draw, Zelisko. But would it be worth the millions?

"It would be a very expensive gamble to find out," he said.

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